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Published in:
History of Political Thought

Published: 01/01/2008

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

McNally, M. (2008). The organization of balance and equilibrium in Gramsci's hegemony. *History of Political Thought*, 29(4), 662-689. <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/imp/hpt/2008/00000029/00000004/art00005>

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The Organization of Balance and Equilibrium in Gramsci's Hegemony

Mark McNally

Abstract

In this article I explore the relatively neglected usage of conceptions of balance and equilibrium in Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony by adopting a contextual approach to his writings that situates them in an intellectual and historical milieu in which the quest for 'equilibrium' had become one of the most important issues of the day. In the first part of the article I show how ideas of balance and equilibrium were developing among sources familiar to Gramsci including Italian Fordism, the theorists of the Russian Revolution and neo-classical economics. The second part demonstrates how Gramsci developed these ideas within the framework of his theory of hegemony. My aim is not only to provide a new perspective on Gramsci's hegemony, but also, to suggest that incorporating notions of balance and equilibrium into the theory will render it more coherent and realistic for its contemporary deployment in political and ideological analysis.

Introduction¹

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony has long enjoyed considerable attention in the field of political and ideological analysis.² Yet there remains little accord among a new generation of Gramscians about just what Gramsci understood by hegemony. While there is general agreement that the novelty of the theory resides in its sophisticated treatment of 'ideological ascendancy' in civil society where a dominant group uses so-called 'private institutions' like the media, the education system and various cultural organisations to disseminate its ideas and values in an effort to manufacture consent and win legitimacy for its continuing rule,³ the role of the economic structure and the central state in the maintenance of hegemony - as well as the character of the unity achieved in any hegemonic formation - have continued to be significant bones of contention among those who apply the theory.

¹ I am grateful to the participants of a section I co-organised with Dr John Schwarzmantel at the ECPR General Conference in Pisa (2007) - *The Continuing Relevance of Antonio Gramsci* - and colleagues at Essex who provided initial feedback, and also an anonymous referee whose comments were very helpful. I acknowledge too the ESRC's financial support (Grant Ref. PTA-026-27-1394).

² The two most recent developments are Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's 're-articulation' of hegemony into poststructuralist theory and Robert Cox's introduction of hegemony into international relations. See E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, 1985); R. Cox, 'Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations', in *Millennium* 12, 2, (1983), pp.162-175.

³ J. Martin, *Gramsci's Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke, 1998), p.114.

The debate of course has not remained immune from the history of ideas. Various commentators have traced the intellectual origins and development of Gramsci's hegemony along divergent paths that sustain conflicting opinions on the feasibility and nature of its deployment in the present. While Perry Anderson and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have situated Gramsci's hegemony within a predominantly Russian Marxist tradition of thought,⁴ Richard Bellamy and Darrow Schecter have more recently argued that it is only in returning Gramsci to his historical context in the Italian political tradition of his day that we can hope to grasp the nature of his ideas.⁵ Working within a similar methodological framework as Bellamy and Schecter,⁶ in what follows I intend to return Gramsci once again 'to his historical context' to explore a particular dimension of his theory of hegemony that has been all but neglected in the current literature: namely, the use of conceptions of balance and equilibrium in the organization of hegemony.⁷ As the article will demonstrate, this dimension of Gramsci's hegemony is as much indebted to his roots in the Marxist tradition of his day at the Comintern as it is to his Italian origins.

⁴ P. Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', in *New Left Review*, 100, (1976-77), pp.15-18; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp.1-65.

⁵ R. Bellamy and D. Schecter, *Gramsci and the Italian State* (Manchester, 1993), p.xv.

⁶ Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁷ Authors who do give some attention to Gramsci's use of equilibrium and balance are Christine Buci-Glucksmann, A.R. Buzzi and Joseph Femia. See C. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State* (London, 1980), pp.93-97; A.R. Buzzi, *La Théorie politique d'Antonio Gramsci*, (Paris-Louvain, 1967), pp. 221-223; J. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford, 1981), pp.153-154.

However, I should stress from the outset that I do not intend to endorse a ‘Comintern Gramsci’ to counter Bellamy and Schecter’s ‘Italian’ Gramsci. On the contrary, the influences that informed Gramsci’s use of the conceptual machinery of balance and equilibrium span both the Italian and Marxist traditions, reflecting the extraordinary breadth of Gramsci’s interests. In *Part I* of the article, I accordingly set out the diverse intellectual and historical context in which Gramsci acquired his ideas on balance and equilibrium. On the one hand, I build on aspects of Gramsci’s intellectual formation that have been well-covered in the literature to date - Italian and American Fordism and Russian Communism - bringing a new perspective and focus to them by relating them to balance and equilibrium, while on the other, I direct my attention to other sources that have been all but ignored in the current literature – neo-classical economics. In *Part II*, I turn then to demonstrate how these ideas of balance and equilibrium resurfaced among the most central themes in Gramsci’s theory of hegemony including his treatment of the Party and intellectuals as agents of hegemony; the relationship between the three key spheres of society (economics, politics and ideology) in the revolutionary process; and finally, his conception of a class which ‘leads’ with the ‘ideological consent’ of allied and subaltern groups in civil society. Before turning to the contextual analysis, however, I should point out that my interest in this particular aspect of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is by no means of a disinterested or an antiquarian nature. To take up again my opening concerns, my contention is in fact that revisiting the intellectual history of Gramsci’s hegemony and exploring its reliance on conceptions of balance and equilibrium will permit us to perform a *redescription* of the theory in a way that

opens it up to new perspectives and renders it more coherent and useful for deployment in ideological analysis today.⁸ In particular, it allows us to re-assert its attractive *strategic* and *organizational* qualities in relation to the *mediation of power* by the ‘leading group’ that have been somewhat overlooked in recent years, and envisage a theory of hegemony where the emphasis lies on *holistic reciprocity* rather than determinism (whether economic or ideological), and *plurality* and *openness* rather than closed quasi-authoritarian ‘regulation.’ These, however, are issues which will only be worth addressing after the major arguments of this article have been presented, beginning with Gramsci’s early experience and interest in the organizational principles of Taylorism and Fordism which formed a crucial background to the later development of his ideas on balance and equilibrium.

Part I

Taylorism and Organizing Optimality

Taylorism and Fordism have usually been considered preoccupations of the later Gramsci since it was not until the *Prison Notebooks* that he engaged in a full analysis

⁸ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, Vol 1, pp.6-7. Adopting Skinner’s approach of course means rejecting what Adam Morton calls the ‘austere historicism’ of Bellamy and Schecter who argue that Gramsci’s ideas ‘belong inextricably to a past we can no longer share.’ See Bellamy and Schecter, *Gramsci and the Italian State*, pp.165-167; A. Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci: Hegemony and Passive Revolution in the Global Economy* (London, 2007), pp.25-29.

of advanced industrial capitalism.⁹ Moreover, the general tendency in the literature to distinguish between an early Gramsci as the theorist of the factory councils at the *L'Ordine Nuovo* and a latter Gramsci who was concerned almost exclusively with the construction of the revolutionary party and hegemony has obscured to some extent the continuity of interest in Taylorite organizational principles in his writings.¹⁰ In what follows I show how Taylorism – and especially its vital organizing principle of *optimality* – formed an important intellectual backdrop to Gramsci's development of notions of balance and equilibrium, which would later resurface in the *Prison Notebooks* around the theme of the party, its intellectuals and the ideological struggle for hegemony.

It is of course no secret that Gramsci was enthralled by the spectacular achievements of Taylorism in Italy from the outset.¹¹ As Franklin Adler has shown, during the ten years previous to Gramsci's arrival in Turin in 1911, the city had become the home of Italian Fordism and largely on these grounds had experienced 'the highest rate of industrial growth in Italy.'¹² Taylorism essentially involved a set of principles of 'scientific management' for organizing large-scale industrial plants on the basis of

⁹ See *Notebook 22* on 'Americanism and Fordism.' A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere: Vol.III.* ed. Valentino Gerratana (Torino, 2007), pp.2139-2181.

¹⁰ See, however, Massimo Salvadori, *Gramsci e il problema storica della democrazia* (Turin, 1973).

¹¹ F. Adler, 'Factory Councils, Gramsci and the Industrialists', in *Antonio Gramsci: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers. Vol.1. Intellectual and Political Context*, ed. J. Martin (London and New York, 2002), p.257.

¹² F. Adler, *Italian Industrialists from Liberalism to Fascism* (Cambridge, 1995), p.35.

the most technologically advanced, economically efficient and productive means available. Its main innovation was to *optimize* the division of labour by a combination of centralized management in organization and planning, and an equally important decentralization of management functions that could be carried out more efficiently at the local level. From the manager-entrepreneur to the plant manager to the technician and industrial labourer, all were specially selected, trained and coordinated to ensure that each chain of industry functioned with maximum efficiency.¹³ Turin industrialists not only reaped considerable economic success from implementing these Taylorite practices in the car and engineering factories of the city, but through their federations - *Lega Industriale di Torino* and later *Confindustria* - they used Taylorism as the basis of a productivist ideology that challenged the 'divisiveness' of socialist propaganda and held out instead the prospect of 'national' expansion for all sectors of Italian society on the back of a resurgent industry. In particular, they stressed the mutual benefits to workers and owners – in higher wages and higher profits – of cooperation and submission to 'the directing function' of the entrepreneur whose expertise in the art of efficiency was not governed by class interest, but solely by the need to combine factors of production and organize the division of labour on the basis of the input-output principle of achieving 'the maximum effect with the minimum force.'¹⁴

¹³ F. Taylor, 'Scientific Management: Testimony to the House of Representatives Committee, 1912', in *Organization Theory*, ed. D.S. Pugh (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp.124-146.

¹⁴ Adler, *Italian Industrialists from Liberalism to Fascism*, pp.45-57.

What is crucial in understanding the development of the early Gramsci, and indeed, his elaboration of conceptions of balance and equilibrium in his later writings is to recognize the extent to which the organizational principles of Italian Fordism became integrated into his early and developing theory of the revolutionary party. As early as the winter of 1919 before the factory council movement had been properly launched, *L'Ordine Nuovo* was in fact disseminating the lessons of Taylorism among the workers of Turin,¹⁵ and Gramsci rapidly became convinced that in order for the proletariat to become the new 'producer class' it would have to equal and indeed surpass capitalism's formidable organizational capacity, not only in production, but in *all* its revolutionary structures. In his famous article on 'Workers' Democracy' in June 1919 Gramsci thus insisted that a proletarian revolution would only be possible if the PSI (*Partito Socialista d'Italia*), the trade unions and the factory councils were optimally organized by 'coordinating and ordering them into a highly centralized hierarchy of competences and powers, while respecting the necessary autonomy and articulation of each.' If the centralizing and decentralizing themes of Taylorism were thus present in this article, so too was the rage for efficiency and maximum outcomes, as Gramsci maintained that 'Whoever wills the end, must will the means' and the Italian proletariat could 'economize on time and effort' by following the example of the Russian Revolution.¹⁶

¹⁵ C. Petri, 'Il Sistema Taylor e i Consigli dei Produttori', *L'Ordine Nuovo* 25 October, 1 November, 8 November, 15 November, 22 November 1919.

¹⁶ A. Gramsci, 'Workers' Democracy', in *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, ed. Q. Hoare (London, 1977), pp.65-68.

As is well known, with the failure of the factory council movement in the summer and winter of 1920 Gramsci's attention turned increasingly to the organization of the new emerging PCd'I (*Partito Comunista d'Italia*) as the principle agent of revolution.¹⁷ But it must be stressed that his taste for the organizational principles of the factory and Taylorism did not wane with this development. On the contrary, the Taylorized factory council became the 'model of communist society'; a society in which 'class divisions will be a thing of the past' and 'all social relations will be regulated in accordance with the technical requirements of production and its corresponding organization.'¹⁸ In the Communist Party the worker would therefore be transformed from '*executor* to *initiator*, from *mass* to *leader* [my italics]....an organizer rather than someone who is organized.'¹⁹ Indeed, the slogan of the new Communist Party according to Gramsci could only be: 'organization, maximum effort of organization, maximum speed in ordering and organizing the fabric of the new party.'²⁰ Although Gramsci was well aware of the technical problems of

¹⁷ A. Showstack Sassoon, *Gramsci's Politics* (London, 1987), p.49. The PCI was founded in January 1921.

¹⁸ A. Gramsci, 'The Turin Factory Councils Movement', in *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, p.317. Gramsci was not alone in employing the factory metaphor to examine and address social problems in 1920s Europe under the influence of the Second Industrial Revolution and 'Americanism.' See C.S. Maier, 'Society as Factory', in *In Search of Stability* (Cambridge, 1987), pp.19-69.

¹⁹ A. Gramsci, 'The Communist Party', in *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920*, p.333.

²⁰ A. Gramsci, 'Caporetto and Vittorio Veneto', in *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, ed. Quintin Hoare (Minneapolis, 1990), p.3.

balancing tasks and materials that all productive processes entailed at this time,²¹ he had not as yet begun to associate these Taylorite ideas with notions of balance and equilibrium. This intellectual transition only occurred thanks to his experience in Revolutionary Russia in 1922-1923.

Trotsky and Political and Dynamic Equilibrium

Gramsci's arrival in Moscow in May 1922 as PCd'I delegate to the Comintern actually coincided with the opening of a major economic discussion among leading Russian theorists on both the crisis of capitalism and the crisis in the Soviet economy which was largely conducted in terms of the capacity of each of the economic systems to regain or establish *equilibrium*.²² While equilibrium – the notion of an economy in which the sectors of supply and demand were proportionally and optimally balanced - had long enjoyed much currency in liberal economics, the increasing interventionist policies of capitalist states in the West and the advent of a Russian State that was committed to a programme of state planning and *balanced* growth under the new *Gosplan* (1921) led to a redescription of this concept in

²¹ The *L'Ordine Nuovo* group were especially active in promoting the 'factory schools' during the *biennio rosso* whose *primary* function – beyond the cultural work frequently associated with them – was preparing the workers for replacing the capitalist in production by providing them with technical training about effective and efficient production in their industrial sectors and plants. M. Clark, *Antonio Gramsci and the Revolution that Failed* (New Haven and London, 1977), pp.56-58.

²² See, A. Belykh, 'Bogdanov's Theory of Equilibrium and the Economic Discussions of the 1920s', *Soviet Studies*, 42, 3 (1990), pp. 571-582.

Russian circles. In my view it was precisely from these Russian sources that Gramsci first acquired this conceptual machinery, and in the following two sections I explore how Trotsky and Bukharin developed notions of balance and equilibrium – under the influence of Taylorism and Bogdanov - beyond economics giving them a *political, dynamic, holistic* and *ideological* inflection that Gramsci would later elaborate on in his theory of hegemony.

It was in fact in the course of two long speeches at the Third (1921) and Fourth (1922) World Congresses of the Comintern that Trotsky first began to employ the concept of equilibrium in a Marxist context. As we will see later, Gramsci's writings confirm that he was well aware of the content of these speeches and actually was present for Trotsky's speech at the Fourth World Congress.²³ The essential point which emerges from Trotsky's two interventions in respect of equilibrium and the economic crises confronted by capitalist and socialist regimes was that both had successfully used the coercive and concessionary powers of the state to establish a *political equilibrium* that in turn had helped to restore - or at least ameliorate - economic equilibrium. In the case of capitalism, Trotsky argued that the restoration was temporary since 'the very mainstays of capitalist equilibrium are shaking and

²³ G. Fiori, *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary* (London, 1990), pp.159. Quinton Hoare has already highlighted the importance of this speech by Trotsky for Gramsci's analysis of Western capitalism. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.236.

collapsing' as 'the crises become more and more prolonged and deeper-going.'²⁴ This, however, Trotsky insisted, did not guarantee its collapse since 'economic equilibrium' was closely bound up with 'political equilibrium' and capitalism had succeeded in manipulating the latter in the post-War period to bring about a stabilization making 'very great concessions' and 'throwing sops to the working class which 'the conciliators' - the 'social democrats' and the 'labour aristocracy' - 'obsequiously converted ...into reforms (the 8-hour day, unemployment insurance, and so on).'²⁵ Indeed, Trotsky made no apology for the fact that the Soviet State was conducting similar policies to facilitate the establishment of its own economic equilibrium, and in his *Terrorism and Communism* (1920) he had even proposed using the coercive apparatus of the Russian State to carry out a 'militarization' and 'Taylorization' of industry in which the State would effectively take control of the trade unions in order to 'organize' 'educate' 'discipline' and 'group' 'the working class for the ends of production.'²⁶ By the time Gramsci heard Trotsky address the Comintern in 1922, however, he had abandoned this position and came into line with the New Economic Policy (NEP) which partially reintroduced competition in the Soviet economy to allow the richer peasantry to sell its produce in market conditions in return for taxes that would again prove vital for the expansion of Russian

²⁴ L. Trotsky, 'Report on the World Economic Crisis and the New Tasks of the Communist International, Second Session, June 23, 1921', in *The First Five Years of the Communist International, Volume I* (New York, 1972), pp.174/208.

²⁵ Trotsky, 'Report on the World Economic Crisis and the New Tasks of the Communist International, Second Session, June 23, 1921', pp.181/220/223.

²⁶ L.Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (Michigan, 1961), p.143.

industry.²⁷ While remaining confident that ‘capitalist equilibrium’ had been ‘completely upset’ in the West, in this speech Trotsky focused much more on the need for a ‘balance’ in the Soviet *economic* system, reminding his audience that in contrast to ‘the anarchy’ of capitalism it was ‘the task of the Socialist revolution to install the rule of reason in the domain of economic life and thereby in all other domains of social life.’²⁸ However, as he had done at the previous Congress, he consistently returned to the ‘interrelationship’ between ‘the economic foundation and the superstructure,’ claiming that the Soviet system had ‘learned a little from the bourgeoisie’ in the practice of alternating ‘repressions and concessions,’ and arguing that the ‘Concessions granted by the workers’ state to the bourgeoisie simply represent a compromise dictated by the difficulties of development’ which unlike the case of capitalism was ‘predetermined and assured by history.’²⁹

If what emerges then from Trotsky’s initial account of equilibrium is a *dynamic* interdependent relationship between politics and economics, he was to give this a further *dialectical* twist by suggesting that capitalist and socialist equilibrium developed inversely. Although the above implied that the collapse of capitalism was inevitable, Trotsky in fact maintained that the development of socialism was by no

²⁷ E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol II* (London, 1963), p.272.

²⁸ L. Trotsky, ‘Report on the New Soviet Economic Policy and the Perspectives of the World Revolution, Delivered at the November 14, 1922 Session of the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern’, in *The First Five Years of the Communist International, Volume II* (New York, 1953), pp.226/235.

²⁹ Ibid, pp.252-253.

means guaranteed by economic laws, since capitalism's *dependence on politics* in the era of economic crisis dictated that it was only in fully adopting the Comintern's United Front strategy of winning over the masses of workers from social democracy - 'who kept the working class within the bounds of bourgeois equilibrium' - that such an outcome could be assured.³⁰ What was required then, according to Trotsky, was 'expert tactics' and 'strong organization' in order '*to gain the majority of the working class prior to the decisive events.*' Without this organizational crusade Trotsky was emphatic that capitalism – which was 'not yet dead' - would 'continue to live in cycles swinging up and down.'³¹ Gramsci's later work would show just how profound an influence these ideas would have on his theory of hegemony, as would those of the other leading light of the early Comintern: Nikolai Bukharin.

Bukharin on Interdependent Development and Ideological Equilibrium

It was in his 1921 book, *Historical Materialism: A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology*, that Bukharin provided his most comprehensive theory of equilibrium.³² As is well-known, Gramsci subjected this work to a rigorous and sustained critique in the *Prison Notebooks* due to its foundation in a deterministic, ahistorical and

³⁰ Trotsky, 'Report on the World Economic Crisis and the New Tasks of the Communist International, Second Session, June 23, 1921', pp.181/222-225.

³¹ Ibid, pp.200/224/226.

³² For its economic propositions, see K.J. Tarbuck, *Bukharin's Theory of Equilibrium* (London, 1989).

undialectical Marxist sociology.³³ On this basis, Bukharin, understandably, has served many a scholar of Gramsci as a useful foil to illustrate the sophisticated quality of the Italian's Marxism.³⁴ But this, I would argue, has obscured the extent to which Gramsci's ideas were framed by, and developed in an engagement with Bukharin's work. What is particularly perplexing in the current literature is the virtual absence of any explanation of the relationship between Bukharin's extensive reliance on equilibrium in the *Popular Manual* - with chapters on 'The Equilibrium between Society and Nature,' 'The Equilibrium between the Elements of Society,' and 'Disturbance and Readjustment of Social Equilibrium' - and Gramsci's own use of this concept.³⁵ In fact, Bukharin's work forms another important part of the backdrop of Gramsci's development of ideas of balance and equilibrium. Particularly important here were his identification of equilibrium with *interdependent holistic development* of all the social spheres and especially his conception of *ideological equilibrium* - to which I now turn.

³³ See, in particular, *Notebooks 4, 7 and 8* in A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol.II*, ed. and transl. J. A. Buttigieg (New York, 1996), pp.137-264; A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol. III*, ed. and transl. J. A. Buttigieg, (New York, 2007), pp.153-383.

³⁴ See, for example, Bellamy and Schecter, *Gramsci and the Italian State* (Manchester, 1993), pp.85-90; C. Boggs, *Gramsci's Marxism* (London, 1976), pp.23-30; C. Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State* (London, 1980), pp.199-236; Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, pp.66-81; J.Martin, *Gramsci's Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke, 1998), pp.77-79.

³⁵ A. Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (London, 1926). The subtitle of the book in Russian and in Gramsci's own French copy was 'A Popular Manual of Marxist Sociology' which is why he consistently referred to it as the 'Popular Manual.' J.A. Buttigieg, 'Notes', in A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol.I*, p.520.

It was in fact in Bukharin's *Popular Manual* that Gramsci encountered for the first time an account of equilibrium that analysed society as a system in which each of its spheres – economic, political and ideological – were *interdependent* and functioned in perfect coordination when healthy. While this notion was obviously partly inspired by Taylorism, it is becoming increasingly evident that Bogdanov's organizational and embryonic systems theory had also a strong influence on such thinking among the theorists of the Russian Revolution and Bukharin in particular.³⁶ Indeed, in the *Popular Manual*, the presence of Bogdanov is equal to that of Marx, as Bukharin virtually reproduces his systems approach in maintaining that 'human society ...may be considered as a whole consisting of parts (elements) related with each other; in other words, this whole may be regarded as a system.'³⁷ Bogdanov's mechanical configuration of dialectics is also in evidence³⁸ – as it had been in Trotsky – with Bukharin identifying the dialectic with 'constant internal contradictions' and a 'clash of forces' that can lead to: a 'reestablishment of equilibrium on the former basis' ('*stable equilibrium*'); a reestablishment 'on a new and "higher" basis ...on which society will increase and develop' ('*unstable equilibrium with positive (favourable) indication*'); and a reestablishment on a

³⁶ John Biggart thus argues that 'the extent of Bogdanov's influence upon Soviet intellectual life during the 1920s is only now being realized.' J. Biggart, 'Bukharin's Theory of Cultural Revolution', in *The Ideas of Nikolai Bukharin*, ed. A.Kemp-Welch (Oxford, 1992), pp.131-2.

³⁷ Bukharin, *Historical Materialism*, p.75.

³⁸ A. Belykh, 'Bogdanov's Tektology and Economic Theory', in *Alexander Bogdanov and the Origins of Systems Thinking in Russia*, eds. J. Biggart, P.Dudley and F. King (Aldershot, 1998), pp.144-145.

“lower” basis ...with ‘the extinction of a portion of this system’ (*Unstable equilibrium with negative indication*).³⁹ Although Gramsci would later describe this conception of dialectics inspired by Bogdanov and the natural sciences as ‘flat vulgar ...evolutionalism,’⁴⁰ the notions of interdependence and expansion and contraction that it entailed would nonetheless be taken up and developed in his theory of hegemony.

But even more important than these conceptions of holism, interdependence and contraction and expansion was the explicit inclusion of an ‘ideological equilibrium’ within the social system in Bukharin’s approach. Starting from the contention that in a healthy reproductive society a stable equilibrium must exist between production and the natural environment,⁴¹ Bukharin argued, that so too ‘if society as a whole is to endure, there must exist within it a certain condition of equilibrium (though it be unstable) between the material work as a whole and the superstructural work as a whole.’ For Bukharin this additional support for the social order would require a cadre of class-based ideological functionaries to *organize* it with ‘a certain proportionality’ in ‘the distribution of labour within the superstructure’ and within ‘the branches of ideological work in particular.’ Their task would be to ‘mould the minds of the people’ on the model of Taylorized American capitalism by means of

³⁹ Bukharin, *Historical Materialism*, pp.72-77. The latter coincided with Trotsky’s above analysis of capitalist decline.

⁴⁰ A.Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith (London, 2003), p.437.

⁴¹ Bukharin, *Historical Materialism*, pp.104-129.

the press and the education system.⁴² Bukharin, however, did not see this process as a simple imposition or indoctrination of proletarian ideology *de novo*, but rather an organized rationalization of the extant ‘social psychology’ (‘little systematized feelings, thoughts and moods found in the given society, class, group, profession etc.’) which would be *critically* ‘systematized’ and ‘coordinated’ into a ‘social ideology’ (‘the system of thoughts, feelings, or rules of conduct (norms)’ including ‘art’ ‘customs’ and ‘morals’) and ‘serve as rivets to hold together the existing order’ and ‘girders to maintain the equilibrium of the entire social body.’⁴³

Now while the ahistorical and abstractly systematized character of this conception of ideological equilibrium will come as no surprise to readers of Gramsci, what perhaps will be more noteworthy is the value that is accorded to both human will (organization) and ideology in these arguments raised by Bukharin. The problem, of course, was that they were consistently contradicted and undermined throughout his *Popular Manual* by recourse to a much more prominent economic and materialistic determinism that the author seemed incapable of recognising.⁴⁴ In the deluge of criticism aimed at Bukharin in the *Prison Notebooks*, it is not surprising that Gramsci’s acquisition and development of his ideas on equilibrium have gone unnoticed. This development, however, only became possible after Piero Sraffa

⁴² Ibid, pp.219-221.

⁴³ Ibid, pp.208-209/215/255-6.

⁴⁴ Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, pp.66-81.

directed Gramsci towards more sophisticated theories of equilibrium in neo-classical economics to which I now turn.

Sraffa and Competitive-Compromise Equilibrium in Neo-classical Economics

The influence of the Italian-born Cambridge economist, Piero Sraffa, on Gramsci has remained – like his Russian experience – one of the more enigmatic areas in Gramsci studies. Although it has long been recorded that Sraffa was one of Gramsci's chief aids during his prison years and the two men had engaged in some covert - if relatively minor - intellectual exchanges on the subjects of Ricardian economics and Benedetto Croce during his years in prison,⁴⁵ the possibility of an earlier Sraffian influence on Gramsci's intellectual development has begun to intrigue. In particular, at least one leading Gramsci scholar and an editor of virtually all of his work – Valentino Gerratana – has argued that Sraffa played a significant role in encouraging Gramsci to rethink Party strategy in the mid-1920s.⁴⁶ More recently their close personal and intellectual relationship between 1923 and 1926 - before Gramsci's arrest and imprisonment and especially after his return to Italy in May 1924 to take his seat as a PCI deputy - has given the Gramsci-Sraffa nexus new impetus.⁴⁷ In what follows I argue that the impact of Sraffa on the development of Gramsci's

⁴⁵ See A. Gramsci, *Letters from Prison. Vol.II*, ed. F. Rosengarten and transl. R. Rosenthal (New York, 1994), pp.162-82; A. Gramsci and T. Schucht, *Lettere 1926-1935* (Torino, 1997), pp.970-1024.

⁴⁶ V. Gerratana, 'Introduzione', in P. Sraffa, *Lettere a Tania per Gramsci* (Rome, 1991), pp.xvi-xxi.

⁴⁷ N. Naldi, 'The Friendship between Piero Sraffa and Antonio Gramsci in the years 1919-1927', *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 7:1, (2000), pp.79-114.

thought had more of an indirect character. For although we have little evidence of the nature of the discussions that took place between them in the years before and after his imprisonment,⁴⁸ what we can be sure of is that it was through Sraffa that Gramsci developed a critical interest in neo-classical economics during his early years in prison and especially the work of two of its major exponents: Maffeo Pantaleoni and Alfred Marshall.⁴⁹ In what follows I highlight the usage of a conception of *competitive-compromise equilibrium* in their work and show how these neo-classical economists married it to the *functional* conception of equilibrium that Gramsci was already familiar with (Taylorism) in their theories of production and the competitive firm. The confrontation with these ideas was, I believe, a further crucial staging-post in Gramsci's acquisition and development of the language of balance and equilibrium in his theory of hegemony.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See, however, Sraffa's unsigned letter to the new edition of *L'Ordine Nuovo* calling for a 'democratic opposition' to fascism with the cooperation of the PCI and Gramsci's negative, yet thoughtful, reply. A. Gramsci and P. Sraffa, 'Problems of Today and Tomorrow', in Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, pp.229-236.

⁴⁹ Gramsci wrote to Sraffa just two months after his arrest asking him to send him some books and especially a 'good treatise on economics and finance for my studies.' Shortly afterwards, he received a 'package of books' from Sraffa. The package most likely included Marshall's *Principles of Economics* (1925) and Pantaleoni's *Pure Economics* (1931). See, Gramsci, *Letters from Prison: Vol.I*, ed. F. Rosengarten and transl. R. Rosenthal (New York, 1994), pp.44-45/50.

⁵⁰ For discussions of these two conceptions of equilibrium in the context of political constitutionalism which have partly informed this article, see R. Bellamy, *Political Constitutionalism: A Republican Defence of the Constitutionality of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2007), pp.195-208; D. Wooton,

Although competitive-compromise equilibrium in neo-classical economics was a much more complicated affair than in classical economics, it should nonetheless be noted from the outset that it owed its origins to the same fundamental economic principle that the latter had first ‘discovered’: namely, the idea of *homo oeconomicus*. As the *Prison Notebooks* confirm, Gramsci was clearly intrigued by this abstract account of universal competitive man,⁵¹ and especially as it appeared in Pantaleoni’s work where a ‘pure’ economic theory was erected on the ‘hedonic principle’ that ‘men are actuated in the production, consumption, distribution and circulation of wealth, exclusively by the desire to obtain the maximum satisfaction of their wants that circumstances admit of, with the least possible individual sacrifice.’⁵² The neo-classics in fact claimed that the conditions of competition that followed from this simple principle would result in a mutually beneficial *compromise* equilibrium. The strength, however, of their approach over the classical economists resided in the novel concept of ‘marginal utility’ which provided a much more coherent and sophisticated account of how such compromises were reached. In Pantaleoni’s abstract economic model, for example, marginal utility (‘the final degree of utility’) was closely associated with the Ricardian theory of ‘comparative costs’ as he argued that the primary condition for an exchange between two parties

‘Liberty, Metaphor and Mechanism: “Checks and Balances” and the Origins of Modern Constitutionalism’, http://www.ucl.ac.uk/spp/download/seminars/0203/22Check_Bal.doc

⁵¹ A. Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1995), ed. D. Boothman, pp.170-173.

⁵² M. Pantaleoni, *Pure Economics* (London, 1898), p.9.

was ‘a difference in the comparative degrees of final utility of the commodities to be exchanged.’⁵³ That is to say, that each party would assess subjectively the utility they attributed to the final unit of a particular commodity they possessed in comparison with a unit of a commodity possessed by some other party, weighing up the costs and benefits of any exchange. For Pantaleoni, ‘if both are perfect hedonists’ then the ‘*equilibrium price*’ resulting from the exchange gives ‘both parties *equal gain in terms of utility*’ and ‘the strain is equal on both sides.’ Although he recognized that there would always be a degree of ‘arbitrariness’ in the rate of exchange and that there would only be a tendency towards equilibrium,⁵⁴ his *Pure Economics* nevertheless generalized the logics of ‘marginal utility’ and ‘comparative costs’ across the different sectors of the economy envisaging a situation in which competition and compromise reigned side by side with exchange relations gravitating towards perfect proportionality between effective supply and demand.⁵⁵

Now what is important to grasp about theories of equilibrium of this nature is that they deliberately imply that a kind of benevolence is at work in a competitive ‘free market’ facilitating the increase of wealth and economic efficiency. However, by the early twentieth century the sun was clearly setting on the era of laissez-faire capitalism and its internal benevolence, and even the neo-classical ‘pure’ economics

⁵³ Pantaleoni, *Pure Economics*, pp.142/145. Pantaleoni in fact claimed that the theories of marginal utility and Ricardo’s comparative costs were ‘substantially *identical*.’ Ibid, p.143.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.142-6.

⁵⁵ See Pantaleoni, ‘Chapter 3: The Law of Demand and Supply’, in *Pure Economics*, pp.164-209.

of Pantaleoni did not remain impervious to the huge influence of planning and organization that the Second Industrial Revolution and Fordism in particular had demonstrated in modern industry. It was in this context, that a functionalist conception of equilibrium increasingly began to find its way into economic theory, and particularly its account of the entrepreneur and his *organizational* role of combining and balancing the factors of production in the competitive firm where the two conceptions of equilibrium actually co-existed dynamically. While there is no space here to expand on Marshall's extensive writings on production and the equilibrium of the 'representative firm' – or indeed Sraffa's critique of his position which marked his spectacular entrance into the field of economic theory⁵⁶ – it will suffice for my purposes to make two key points about Marshall and Pantaleoni's conception of the balancing of the factors of production in industry that would later be taken up by Gramsci. Firstly, in both cases the equilibrium of the firm is associated with a centralized human organizational power (entrepreneurial management) that is responsible for coordination and harmony between the various factors in competitive circumstances where – theoretically at least – any agent can assert its autonomy by withdrawing its labour, capital etc. to employ elsewhere should more favourable conditions of contract become available.⁵⁷ Although Marshall's work provided the most comprehensive account of the equilibrium of the

⁵⁶ See, P. Sraffa, 'Sulle Relazioni fra Costo e Quantita Prodotta', *Annali di Economia*, 2 (1925), pp.277-328; P. Sraffa, 'The Laws of Returns under Competitive Conditions', *Economic Journal*, 36 (1926), pp.535-550.

⁵⁷ A. Marshall, *Principles of Economics* (London, 1947, Eighth Edition), pp.138-322; Pantaleoni, *Pure Economics*, pp.278-283/305-307.

firm, it was Pantaleoni who found the most appealing means of illuminating this process of balancing factors for Gramsci through his notion of the ‘law of definite proportions’ (*legge delle proporzioni definite*). In Pantaleoni’s *Pure Economics* the factors of production are thus equated with complementary and instrumental commodities which we are told are just like chemical compounds that will combine ‘only in definite proportions.’⁵⁸ Clearly linking this notion with the wider responsibilities of the entrepreneur in the division of labour, he claimed that ‘only a determinate number of workers, given the quality of their work, can be combined with a determinate quantity of capital to produce the *maximum degree of efficiency*,’⁵⁹ and indeed, ‘any quantity of a commodity in excess of the proportion in which nature, or any technical art, can combine it with a determinate quantity of other complementary commodities present is *useless* or *noxious* as regards the economic result.’⁶⁰ The second major point to be made about such neo-classical theories of production was accordingly that for theorists like Pantaleoni and Marshall the industrial entrepreneur was confronted with a complex task of achieving functional and compromise equilibrium at the margin in conditions where force – in its overtly coercive sense – was not an option. These were ideas that were for Gramsci pregnant with political as well as economic significance, as he would demonstrate in his development of their logic in his theory of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks*, to which I now turn.

⁵⁸ Pantaleoni, *Pure Economics*, pp.82-85/251.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.256.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.83.

Part II

Revisiting Functional Equilibrium in the Party's Division of Labour

If there is one area in which notions of balance and equilibrium have been accorded at least some attention in the current literature on Gramsci's political thought, it is in relation to his account of the proper organizational strategy of the revolutionary party and its intellectual cadres where Gramsci actually quotes Pantaleoni's 'theorem of definite proportions.' While Joseph Femia has found the concept to be of little 'operational value' due to its circularity ('equilibrium' is a precondition of 'effectiveness'; but the sole criterion for determining 'equilibrium' is 'effectiveness'),⁶¹ A.R. Buzzi reduces the notion of 'definite proportions' to one of numerical and optimal proportioning of mass between three levels in the Party hierarchy using the image of a pyramid to capture the idea.⁶² Since I intend to argue for a much more extensive use of notions of balance and equilibrium in Gramsci's theory of hegemony by illustrating how they were developed from the sources I have examined in the first part of this article, it seems appropriate for me to begin my discussion on the same terrain as these commentators with the agents of hegemony: the Party and its intellectuals. In this section, I therefore begin my discussion on Gramsci by demonstrating the presence of a *reconstructed* Taylorism in his

⁶¹ Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, pp.153-154.

⁶² Buzzi, *La Théorie politique d'Antonio Gramsci*, pp. 221-223.

organizational theory of the Party and the intellectuals which he identifies as a kind of *functional equilibrium*. I pursue this argument by showing how the *technical* requirements of equilibrium informed, firstly, his attitude to the specialized training of different cadres of ‘organic intellectuals’ by the Party; secondly, his vision of the Party levels as interdependent and proportionally optimized in terms of both their mass *and competencies*; and finally, his strong endorsement of democratic structures in the Party which was also defended primarily on technical and functional grounds. All of the former were for Gramsci essential preparation in the battle for hegemony.

Although Gramsci’s category of ‘organic intellectuals’ has led many commentators to rightly emphasize his insistence on their embedded position in class relations and the crucial mediating role they played between the masses and political institutions,⁶³ this has sometimes overshadowed the extent to which Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks* ‘actually defines the organic intellectuals in terms of organisational activity and technical specialisation.’⁶⁴ It is here of course where the Italian’s renewed interest in the organizational principles of Taylorism is especially evident, particularly as he now proposes that the Party (i.e. the revolutionary party) must develop different cadres of intellectuals *specialized* to take over the tasks of the capitalist in all three spheres of production, politics and civil society. Gramsci, in fact, in elaborating his theory of the Party intellectuals proposes a functional division of labour in line with these categories, with a cadre of economic intellectuals

⁶³ See, for example, Martin, *Gramsci’s Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction*, pp.44-47.

⁶⁴ Showstack Sassoon, *Gramsci’s Politics*, p.139.

responsible for ‘organizing the social hegemony of a group,’ another for organizing the ‘domination of the state’ and yet another responsible for organizing ‘the consent that comes from the prestige attached to the function in the world of production.’⁶⁵ For Gramsci this specialization of socialist ‘organic intellectuals’ would commence in civil society around the Party newspaper or periodical with an intellectual elite developing a programme for producing cadres of ‘specialized functionaries.’⁶⁶ The programme would, according to Gramsci, eventually turn out ‘intellectuals who are well-trained to engage in regular publishing activities’ with the Party elite setting ‘criteria and ideas concerning the assignment of further work and its distribution among the entire personnel, in such a way as to induce the individual members to specialize and create for themselves the conditions of specialization.’ ‘The method of work,’ he continued, ‘should be strict and rigorous’ with each new group member even being assigned a mentor ‘helping him to work and to develop for himself a working discipline, a method of production that would “Taylorize” him intellectually, so to speak.’⁶⁷

If Gramsci’s plans for the effective training of Party intellectuals thus reproduced the Taylorite organizational principles of functional equilibrium in its emphasis on ‘specialization’ in the division of labour, it did likewise when Gramsci turned to the *relations* between the Party’s hierarchical levels. However, contrary to what Femia

⁶⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Vol.II*, pp.200-201. Gramsci recognised a similar division of labour among the intellectuals of capitalist hegemony. Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere: Vol.III*, p.2041.

⁶⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp.28-29.

⁶⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume II*, pp.209-210.

and Buzzi have argued, for Gramsci the development of an equilibrium in these relations is not simply a question of numerical proportioning of mass or the vague notion of ‘effectiveness,’ but rather, a question of the efficient organization and coordination of the *functions* of each hierarchical tier of a *specific* party, in a *specific* historical context, to meet *specific* objectives. Just as every economic system has ‘its own law of determinate proportions [my italics]’ and ‘its own “optimum” equilibrium’ in its internal relations,⁶⁸ so too, Gramsci argued, must the political party seek to attain a similar equilibrium in the relations between its various hierarchical tiers. It is clear, moreover, that the specific party that Gramsci has in mind is the PCd’I which had a *particular* goal and strategy – the United Front. If one might concur with Femia that Gramsci does not give us precise criteria for the functions to be carried out at each party level in the passage on Pantaleoni’s theorem, he does - as Femia himself recognises - in other parts of the *Prison Notebooks* identify at least some criteria to be applied to a rejuvenated Communist Party. The highest level of the Party (the central executive) is accordingly identified as ‘the principle cohesive element’ endowed with ‘great cohesive, centralizing, disciplinary ...innovative powers’; ‘the intermediate element’ is responsible for maintaining not only ‘physical’ but also ‘moral and intellectual’ contact between the leaders and led; while the mass element’s role ‘takes the form of discipline and loyalty.’⁶⁹ It is precisely these ‘qualities’ or functional criteria that I would argue that Gramsci had in mind in taking up Pantaleoni’s conception of equilibrium as a ‘law of definite

⁶⁸ Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, Vol.III, p.2145.

⁶⁹ Femia, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, pp.152-153.

proportions.’ Indeed, this becomes obvious if we consider the *dynamic* and *expansive* re-articulation to which Gramsci subjects Pantaleoni’s theorem - reminiscent of Trotsky and Bukharin – bringing it into line with the dialectical and mass-building character of the United Front strategy. For Gramsci anticipates that as the Party built up its mass base, in order to maintain its equilibrium as a truly revolutionary party it would also be required to elaborate *both qualitatively* and *quantitatively* its two higher levels to adequately protect itself from the kind of ‘liquidationist’ ‘corrupting’ tendencies that had so exercised the PCd’I in its early years.⁷⁰ It is for precisely this reason that Gramsci is careful to insist that in the ‘relations between the various arms and corps...Each change in a single part necessitates a new equilibrium with the whole.’⁷¹

We should not, however, assume that for Gramsci the Party would therefore be divided into *closed* hierarchical functional segments. Indeed, he considered that one of the strengths of the modern capitalist state - which the Party would replace - was that it had abandoned this organization pattern typical of the classical and medieval state with its ‘mechanical bloc of social groups ...with separate functions.’⁷² If the Party was to act effectively, Gramsci maintained, it too must act *collectively* (as a ‘collective intellectual’) to achieve its objectives and for Gramsci this could only be assured through the development of adequate *democratic* structures in the Party

⁷⁰ See P. Spriano, ‘10. Il Dissenso con il Komintern’ in *Storia del partito comunista italiano: Da Bordiga a Gramsci, Vol I* (Torino, 1967).

⁷¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp.190-192.

⁷² Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere, Vol.III*, p.2287.

which would nurture and preserve coordination and close responsive relations between all of its parts. Thus, in his prison writings Gramsci's endorsement of Leninist centralization and discipline is offset by a reconfigured 'democratic centralism' marked by 'continual adaptation' between levels where 'orders from above' are now counterpoised by 'thrusts from below' and the necessity for 'a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership.'⁷³ Although, it should be acknowledged that Gramsci failed to explicate in any detail how these democratic structures would be organised and preserved, their importance should not be under-stated since they formed his one major bulwark against what he regarded as the most significant problem of disequilibrium in the Party organisational structure: the bureaucratization and isolation of the leadership.⁷⁴ When this happens, Gramsci claimed, 'the party ends up by becoming anachronistic and at moments of acute crisis it is voided of its social content and left as though suspended in mid-air.'⁷⁵ Democratic structures thus played a major *technical* role in preserving vitality and equilibrium between each level of the Party. In fact, Gramsci's emphasis on interdependence and functional equilibrium was a recurring theme in the *Prison Notebooks*, as the next section on Gramsci's rethinking of the Party's revolutionary strategy clearly demonstrates.

⁷³ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp.188-9.

⁷⁴ Ibid, pp.227/188.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.211. Trotsky had used a similar phrase to describe disequilibrium and lack of coordination between economic sectors in his above 1922 Comintern speech. Trotsky, 'Report on the New Soviet Economic Policy and the Perspectives of the World Revolution', p.234.

The Dialectics of Equilibrium in the Revolutionary Process

While it has long been fashionable to distinguish sharply between Gramsci and the theorists of the Russian Revolution, my approach here is to give Trotsky and Bukharin their due, exploring how Gramsci *borrowed* as well as developed their ideas. This, of course, is to take up again my original argument that returning Gramsci to his proper historical context is as much a task of placing him within the Marxist tradition of his day as it is of elucidating the specifically Italian quality of his thought.⁷⁶ In what follows I demonstrate the significant influence of Trotsky and Bukharin's ideas of *interdependence* between levels, *dialectics* and *coordination* on Gramsci's account of disequilibrium and re-equilibrium in the revolutionary process, and I focus in particular on how Gramsci built on their work, developing a more historically sensitive, ideologically centred and humanist account of equilibrium.

Trotsky, it will be recalled, maintained that there was a relationship of interdependence between the economic structure and the politics of the Western capitalist state, and it was the latter which had been successfully manipulated through a mixture of coercive and concessionary measures to re-stabilize capitalism in the era of the post-War crisis. Gramsci in fact elaborated this conception of a relationship of functional interdependence between levels in the capitalist state, but in contrast to Trotsky, he argued that it was not primarily the political state that was

⁷⁶ For explorations of Gramsci's thought in the context of his Marxist contemporaries see, Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci'; C. Mouffe, ed. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London, 1979).

providing the crucial support for capitalist stability in the era of economic crisis, but civil society, where the ideology of the bourgeoisie was dominant at a deeper ‘organic’ and more spontaneous level. This was a significant shift in the Italian’s thinking who just prior to his incarceration in a report to the PCd’I Executive in August 1926 had virtually reproduced Trotsky’s account of capitalist equilibrium in the era of crisis. Referring to the ‘period of so-called *stabilization* [my italics],’ Gramsci thus observed that ‘in the advanced capitalist countries ...politics always lags behind economics’ and ‘even the most serious economic crises do not have immediate repercussions in the political sphere’ since ‘the ruling class possesses political and organizational reserves which it did not possess, for instance, in Russia.’⁷⁷ In the *Prison Notebooks*, however, Gramsci moves beyond this position to remonstrate with Trotsky for his over-reliance on the state as equilibrator, attacking his 1921 plans to use its coercive apparatus to carry out a militarization and Taylorization of labour in Russian industry to right the ‘imbalance between theory and practice’ as an initiative that ‘would have ended up, necessarily, in a form of Bonapartism.’ For Gramsci, this reflected Trotsky’s inability to apprehend that the stability of the crisis-ridden capitalist mode of production was not *primarily* dependent on the state but on *civil society*. It is no coincidence then that immediately following his reflections on this failed attempt by Trotsky to stabilize Russian industry through coercion, Gramsci points out the success of Fordism’s ideological strategy of using its financial weight and influence in American civil society to bring

⁷⁷ A. Gramsci, ‘A Study of the Italian Situation’, in *Selections from Political Writings 1921-1926*, pp.408-409.

the ‘way of life’ into line with production by promoting ‘puritanical’ initiatives such as campaigns against alcohol and sexual promiscuity. Such initiatives, he tells us, helped to ‘preserve a psycho-physical equilibrium outside the place of work in order to prevent the new method from leading to the physiological collapse of the worker.’⁷⁸ The equilibrium of Fordist capitalism was therefore more dependent on ideological persuasion in civil society than state coercion or concessions, and what is particularly to be noted is the *historical* character that Gramsci had now inscribed in the concept. For the ‘puritanical’ nature of these initiatives was an obvious reference to the strong Puritan and Calvinist religious traditions in the United States, showing that the ideological strategy of Fordism had been carefully attuned to its national environment.⁷⁹

This new assessment of the equilibrium of advanced capitalism and its reliance primarily on ideology and civil society obviously had implications for Gramsci’s conception of the revolutionary process that again set his approach apart from Trotsky. The Gramsci of the *Prison Notebooks* now in fact argued that it was crucial to begin the revolution from ‘within’ the consciousness of the workers in order to undermine capitalist equilibrium, while at the same time developing the ‘producer’ mentality that would form the bedrock of a new proletarian order. The strategy was therefore one of disequilibrating the capitalist state by denying it of its ideological defences in civil society which would leave it ‘isolated’ and totally dependent on a

⁷⁸ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume II*, pp.214-220.

⁷⁹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume I*, p.163/453.

dysfunctional economic structure and state coercion – ideal revolutionary conditions. It was here of course that an optimally functioning party of specialized intellectuals would prove vital. For Gramsci never relented in his insistence that all workers beyond their professional activities had an intellectual life and sustained a particular ‘conception of the world’ in civil society, and it was precisely in this sphere where the former would have to engage in an ideological struggle to dislodge and disintegrate the stabilizing consent that capitalism had managed to manufacture. In theorizing the transition in this way, it should be noted, that Gramsci not only turned once again to the language of balance, but also borrowed Trotsky’s conception of the inverse development of proletarian and capitalist equilibrium, with the former actually emerging out of the latter in a dialectical process of disequilibrium and re-equilibrium. The undermining of Fordist ideological strategies among the workers would therefore involve a gradual ‘critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone at a certain degree of development, modifying its relationship with the muscular-nervous effort towards a new equilibrium, and ensuring that the muscular-nervous effort itself; in so far as it is an element of a general practical activity, which is perpetually innovating the physical and social world [i.e. labour], becomes the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world.’⁸⁰ Before this new and ‘integral’ proletarian order could emerge, however, Gramsci recognised that a period of chronic instability in the capitalist order (an ‘organic crisis’) would have to be traversed. Indeed, he even related the advent of fascism to a dangerous point in the transition process when capitalist and socialist blocs were equally matched,

⁸⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.9.

describing this as a ‘static’ or ‘catastrophic’ ‘equilibrium’ in which ‘forces whose opposition is historically incurable’ cannot ‘fuse and unite’ to form ‘an organic equilibrium’ thus providing the conditions ‘from which Caesarism is born (can be born).’⁸¹ As the correction in parenthesis suggests, for Gramsci everything – both the further contraction of capitalist equilibrium and the expansion of socialist equilibrium - would depend now on human will and the ability of the proletarian forces to organize effectively.⁸² In viewing this organization as primarily of an ideological nature in civil society, Gramsci was however now moving more on the terrain of Bukharin rather than Trotsky.

As we have seen, Bukharin tended to see the transition to socialism as a developing equilibrium between the superstructures and the economic base in which - in contrast to capitalism’s economic anarchy – the two were fully and *rationaly coordinated*. Gramsci did in fact pick up this idea from the Russian, but in sharp contrast to Bukharin’s mechanical and ahistorical economic determinism, Gramsci envisaged the process as occuring dialectically with the Party genuinely and effectively exercising its collective *will to organize* the new equilibrium in a specific historical setting which would be reflected in the resulting optimization of social relations. Machiavelli as ‘active politician’ represented the model for the Party to follow in this respect. For ‘the active politician’ not only ‘bases himself on effective reality’

⁸¹ Ibid, p.221-2.

⁸² For a similar account of ‘catastrophic equilibrium’ in Gramsci which links it directly to Marx, see Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, pp.94-95.

recognising that society is not ‘static and immobile’ but ‘rather a relation of forces in continuous motion and shift of equilibrium,’ but also, he applies his will ‘to the creation of a new equilibrium among the forces which really exist and are operative - basing oneself on the particular force which one believes to be progressive and strengthening it to help it to victory.’⁸³ If there can be little doubt then that Gramsci’s account of the developing equilibrium of the new socialist order was infused with a new voluntarist, historicist and dialectical character, it should nonetheless be recognised that he drew heavily on Bukharin in conceiving the transition as a process of ‘rationalization’ and ‘coordination’ between the base and superstructure. In fact, Gramsci takes up the Russian’s idea of a ‘systematization’ of ‘social psychology’ into ‘social ideology,’ thoroughly historicizing his approach and transcending Bukharin’s simplistic distinction between mutually exclusive ‘things and ideas,’ by conceiving the process as one in which socialist theory and practice are unified in an historically specific social setting. This unity, moreover, would again progress dialectically, as Gramsci maintained that the ‘new culture’ of Marxism could only emerge with ‘the development of social relationsa “combination” of old and new, a temporary equilibrium corresponding to the equilibrium in social relations.’⁸⁴ Nothing captures more clearly both Gramsci’s reliance on Bukharin for the kernel of this idea, and the Italian’s insistence on developing it historically and dialectically than his reconfiguration in *Notebook 8* and

⁸³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume III*, p.283. These ruminations on Machiavelli as ‘active politician’ first appeared in *Notebook 8* as part of Gramsci’s wider critique of positivism’s tendency to induce passivism rather than action.

⁸⁴ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume II*, p.144.

Notebook II of Bukharin's rationalization of civil society as the transformation of 'common sense' into 'good sense' or 'philosophy' (i.e. Marxism as a popularly-based *philosophy of praxis*). Betraying the genesis of this idea, Gramsci thus maintained that 'A work like the *Popular Manual* ...should have as its point of departure an analysis and a critique of the philosophy of common sense' whose 'disjointed, incoherent, and inconsequential conception of the world that matches the character of the multitudes' should be transformed with the 'formation of an homogenous social group' into 'a "homogenous – that is, systematic – philosophy, in opposition to common sense."⁸⁵ Given that 'common sense' was necessarily infused with the ideological historical remnants of the bourgeois order, it would be necessary to adopt 'a polemical and critical guise' to it, which for Gramsci – like Bukharin – was not a question of introducing 'from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life' but 'renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity' and progressing it 'to the level of real possession of a single and coherent conception of the world.' This in turn would bring 'organisational stability' of an 'organic quality' to the new and developing proletarian order.⁸⁶ The problem for Gramsci, however, was that in developing a conception of equilibrium that incorporated a historically specific and dialectical account of civil society he was now confronted with a much more diverse and complex challenge of organization and coordination than Bukharin. Notions of functionalist equilibrium might seem feasible in a party or state where the realisation of an homogenous and disciplined

⁸⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume III*, p.333.

⁸⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp.330-333.

class consciousness was all that was required, but in conditions in which the goal was to recognise, integrate and organise diverse and historically specific ideological elements, additional problems arose in the ideological struggle in civil society that required Gramsci to turn to a new conception of equilibrium.

Organizing Ideological Equilibrium as ‘the Hegemonic Function’

While the early Gramsci had emphatically rejected any notion of the Party exercising ‘a balancing function’ between internal interests in favour of a class sectarianism on a par with Bordiga,⁸⁷ the Gramsci of the *Prison Notebooks* now fully embraced a much broader conception of this idea as a necessary task in the battle for hegemony and consent in conditions of a fragmented civil society. In this final section I argue that Gramsci in fact attempted to resolve the organizational and coordinating problems which inevitably came with embracing the plurality and partial autonomy of ideological elements in civil society by borrowing and building on ideas of balance and equilibrium from neo-classical economics and Fordism, and especially on the former’s conception of the dual competitive and functional equilibrium managed by the entrepreneur in production. I focus in particular on how Gramsci reconfigured notions of *leadership*, *compromise*, *coordination* and even *fusion* borrowed from these sources to render his theory of ideological hegemony more persuasive and coherent.

⁸⁷ A. Gramsci, ‘Towards a Renewal of the Socialist Party’, in *Pre-prison Writings*, ed. R. Bellamy (Cambridge, 1994), p.160.

Perhaps the most obvious clue that Gramsci conceives of hegemony as the exercising of a similar role as the capitalist-entrepreneur in the process of production is his insistence throughout the *Prison Notebooks* that the proletariat must abandon its 'economic-corporate' phase and become a *leading class (classe dirigente)*. While Gramsci's use of this term has correctly been seen as a means of distinguishing between ruling by consent (*dirigere*) and ruling by coercion (*dominare*),⁸⁸ it seems to me that the term is also meant to suggest the acquisition by the proletariat of the same directional or managerial (*direzione*) tasks that were typical of the entrepreneur in production. Included here of course was the willingness and capacity to negotiate *compromise equilibria* with the various suppliers of factors; an idea which Gramsci would by then have been totally familiar with through Pantaleoni and Marshall's production theories. Indeed, Gramsci's famous 'war of position' was a recognition that like the entrepreneur a hegemonic proletariat would have to compete for the services of the subaltern groups and arrive at compromise equilibria with them in the interests of collective objectives and the further expansion of its hegemony among elements previously affiliated with the bourgeoisie. The first stage of this process for Gramsci was accordingly the abandoning by the proletariat of its purely selfish 'economic-corporate' phase which would open the way for such compromise and it is significant that he tellingly and explicitly linked this with equilibrium. In one of his clearest definitions of the hegemonic process as the achievement of a compromise

⁸⁸ See, for example, Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith, 'Preface', in Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp.xiii-xiv.

equilibrium between the leading group and subordinate groups Gramsci therefore declared:

...the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed - in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind.⁸⁹

Indeed, the reluctance to compromise on the part of the leading group would be fatal, as Gramsci – like Trotsky – believed the balance and expansion of the proletarian forces was inversely related to *the position* of the capitalist bloc, and if the proletariat failed to make the necessary compromise and win the *active consent* of auxiliary groups, then these same forces would serve to sustain capitalist hegemony.⁹⁰

It was not, however, simply the notion of leading through compromise that linked Gramsci's conception of equilibrium with the tasks of the entrepreneur of the competitive firm in balancing the factors of production. As we have seen, under the influence of Fordist industrial developments, neo-classical theories of production had in fact moved beyond essentially competitive-compromise equilibrium to integrate its more *functionalist* dimensions. Gramsci now picked up on this to suggest that the balancing between the groups in a hegemonic formation was not simply based on

⁸⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.161.

⁹⁰ Ibid, pp.167-168.

bargained compromises, but also, the combining and coordination of the parties for collective ends and universal expansion. This of course was typical of the production theories of neo-classical economics and the productivist ideology of Italian Fordism, and indeed, conceptions of progressive equilibrium in Bogdanov, Bukharin and Trotsky. In a key passage in the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci thus insists:

..the development and expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the “national” energies. In other words, the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the State is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria...⁹¹

What is important to note, moreover, is that the compromise and combination envisaged had now taken on once again a more *dialectical* (note the above use of *equilibria*), *historically grounded* and *ideological* character than a mere bargain between abstract economically-motivated parties. Gramsci, in fact, realised that an equilibrium of this nature – even if it could be reproduced in reality - would not provide the *stability* for a hegemonic alliance to advance effectively, and he therefore sought to situate his equilibrium at the deeper ‘organic’ level of ideology. At this level, it was more a question of *bonding* than combining, and especially of fusing the

⁹¹ Ibid, p.182.

leading class with the *national-popular* ideological elements whose mass support would provide additional and vital stability. Gramsci conceived this process as one where the Party and its mediating functionaries yet again played the central role, arguing that the 'The political party ...is responsible for welding together the organic intellectuals of a given group - the dominant one - and the traditional intellectuals.'⁹² While this was an appropriate strategy in Western Europe, Gramsci's sensitivity to historical context led him to insist on a different strategy for North America where 'The necessity of an equilibrium is determined, not by the need to fuse together the organic intellectuals with the traditional, but by the need to fuse together in a single national crucible with a unitary culture the different forms of culture imported by immigrants of differing national origins.'⁹³

Although the old habits of polemics, and the reluctance to abandon the utopian Marxist vision of a harmonious communist society led Gramsci to imply at times in the *Prison Notebooks* that hegemonic unity would approach the kind of functional equilibrium of a closed system,⁹⁴ he could not escape the fact that the logic of embracing the notion of a competitive-compromise equilibrium in historically evolving conditions meant that - like the capitalist firm - the hegemonic bloc was constantly threatened by disintegration from external competition and assertions of autonomy. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than Gramsci's reliance on a

⁹² Ibid, p.15.

⁹³ Ibid, p.20.

⁹⁴ For Gramsci's harmonious socialism, see F. Sbarberi, *Gramsci: un socialismo armonico* (Milan, 1986).

‘balancing function’ for the leading group which resonated strongly with the central role of the entrepreneur in the firm in Marshall’s neo-classical economics and especially Pantaleoni’s insistence that the entrepreneur’s role was one of combining factors ‘in definite proportions.’ This of course suggested – as in Marshall and Pantaleoni - that a centralized apparatus would be required to ‘proportion’ and ‘check’ so that the weight given to each ideological element did not threaten the efficiency of the overall collective effort or provoke disintegrative antagonisms between the various parties. Gramsci in fact incorporated such a role into his theory of hegemony, claiming that the fundamental class ‘balances the various interests struggling against the predominant (but not absolutely exclusivist) interest’ and is responsible for ‘holding the balance between the various interests in “civil society.”’ It was again ‘the political party’ which would take up this task which was sufficiently vital as to be identified by Gramsci as ‘the hegemonic function’ (*funzione egemonica e quindi equilibratrice*).⁹⁵ Indeed, in a move which further betrayed the origins of the idea Gramsci saw this role as analogous to the position of the ‘Head of State’ in constitutional democracies or ‘the Crown’ in the then developing British Commonwealth whose function like the entrepreneur was one of attempting to reconcile the need for unity with the demands of autonomous elements.⁹⁶ Although it should be acknowledged that Gramsci never arrived at a fully developed conception of this balancing function of the hegemonic class in

⁹⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.253; Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere: Vol I*, p.662.

⁹⁶ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume I*, p.292.

conditions of ideological plurality and competition, he did however offer two tantalizing suggestions of how autonomy could be checked and the siphoning of support by competitors averted.

Checking for Gramsci would appear to have been a case of *educating* and *criticizing* the potentially disintegrative elements. Thus he envisaged the development of socialist hegemony out of the capitalist order as a process in which ‘the first representatives of the new historical phase’ conduct a ‘criticism’ of these elements that ‘results in a process of differentiation and of change in the relative weight that the adherents of the old ideologies used to possess.’ For Gramsci, this was not simply a question of blocking the development of certain elements that had previously been allied to capitalism, but rather a process of *mutual redefinition* which would occur as the new elements were bonded and coordinated ever more closely with the proletarian centre. Consequently, for these rearticulated elements ‘What was once considered secondary and subordinate, or even incidental, comes to be seen as primary and becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex.’⁹⁷ Indeed, it was precisely in the process of the *re-integration* of these dislodged ideological elements that Gramsci believed that the threat of siphoning from hegemonic competitors could be averted. For if the new *relations* were to be enduring the progressive element (‘the element of stability’) would have to take up its leading role and *fuse* the subaltern forces (‘which, though related and allied, are

⁹⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume III*, pp.346-347.

heterogeneous and wavering’)⁹⁸ into an ideological ‘collective will.’ Gramsci maintained that this alone would guarantee revolutionary success. ‘An historical act,’ he thus claimed:

...can only be performed by “collective man,” and this presupposes the attainment of a “cultural-social” unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world, both general and particular...⁹⁹

However, as the above makes patently obvious, equilibrium in civil society had now become the site of a tension between ‘unity’ and ‘autonomy,’ ‘singularity’ and ‘heterogeneity,’ the ‘general’ and the ‘particular.’¹⁰⁰ And it was Gramsci’s intuition of the inability to escape this tension in the wider competition for hegemony that explains his excessive reliance on the language of ‘binding’ (*legare, collegare*), ‘fusing’ (*fondere*) and ‘welding’ (*saldare*) that so marked his later thought. If he more often than not suggested in the *Prison Notebooks* that socialist hegemony would approach the closed ‘organic’ unity of a living organism, we should at least recognise that this was at times offset with a more realistic account of the unity of a hegemonic bloc identified with the concept of equilibrium. In my view, it is the

⁹⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p.189.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p.349.

¹⁰⁰ My reading of Gramsci here is partly inspired by Laclau and Mouffe. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp.65-71.

latter which seems more consonant with the historical, dialectical and democratic character of hegemony that Gramsci is at pains to emphasize in other parts of the *Prison Notebooks*. In fact, in the concluding remarks of this article I want to go further and suggest that my analysis of the origins and use of the language of balance and equilibrium in Gramsci's prison writings has important implications for how his theory of hegemony is interpreted, and indeed, how it might be applied and developed for contemporary political and ideological analysis.

Conclusion: Hegemony and Equilibrium

One key conclusion which can be drawn from the above discussion is that for Gramsci hegemony was as much an *effective organizational strategy* as a philosophical argument about the nature of the political world. Equilibrium was in fact attained through a collective effort of human will - rather than deterministic laws or benevolent competition – and it is precisely for this reason that Gramsci consistently yoked his theory of hegemony throughout the *Prison Notebooks* to the Party and the intellectuals. It seems to me that it is time to reassert this emphasis on organization and the mediation of power in Gramsci's hegemony that his development - if not inversion - of the concept of equilibrium as he found it so clearly demonstrates. This, I believe, is especially appropriate in a context in which current poststructuralist applications of hegemony appear too fixated with highly generalized philosophical arguments at the expense of political agency and the actual

processes through which hegemonic formations are concretized.¹⁰¹ I do not of course wish to suggest that the application of Gramsci's hegemony should now be accompanied by a quest for the kind of rigid and uncompromising organizational strategies of Taylorism or Leninism (which, as we have seen, Gramsci did not espouse). Rather, it is more a question of insisting on the methodological principle that part of the explanation of hegemonic formations must include an adequate account of the central mediating agencies of organization, coordination and *balance* without which it is in my view impossible to maintain the coherence of the theory.

A second important conclusion of this article is that Gramsci's hegemony should be firmly situated within the *holistic* Marxist ontology from which it emerged. This, I believe, is not only to remain more faithful to the emphasis on *interdependence* and *coordination* between levels that Gramsci's use of the concept of equilibrium so clearly illustrates, but also, to avoid the inevitable contradictions or 'antinomies' that ensue with any effort to confine Gramsci's hegemony to the realm of civil society and ideology which have been well-documented and are, it must be acknowledged, largely of the Italian's own making.¹⁰² 'Ideologism' of this nature was inspired by what now seem anachronistic efforts to disassociate Gramsci from the twin 'evils' of

¹⁰¹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It should, however, be acknowledged that Laclau's later work and especially his development of the category of 'political subjectivity' attempted to redress this weakness to some extent. For example, E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London, 1990), pp.3-85.

¹⁰² See, for example, Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci'; R. Mondolfo, 'Le antinomie di Gramsci', *Critica Sociale*, 23 (1963).

the economic determinism of Second International Marxism (Plekhanov, Kautsky) and the obsessive statism of Third Internationalists (Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin), and I need hardly add that my endorsement of a more holistic approach to hegemony is by no means an attempt to return to these outdated canons. On the contrary, what Gramsci's recourse to the language of balance and equilibrium reinforces is the reciprocal relationship between levels of society that necessarily involves the abandonment of simplistic notions of determinism of any kind. Indeed, in my view the development of the concept of equilibrium offers further hope of rescuing Gramsci's hegemony from all determinisms - including the Italian's own residual economism¹⁰³ - but especially from the aforementioned *ideological determinism* that naively under-estimates economic and state power in a manner which critics such as Perry Anderson have rightly condemned.¹⁰⁴

Finally, Gramsci's reliance on the economic conception of a competitive-compromise equilibrium – especially in relation to the ‘balancing function’ of a leading group in civil society - leads us to conclude that there is in the *Prison Notebooks* a peripheral and more realistic Gramsci who recognises that the Hegelian ideal of a harmonious and rational utopia that he frequently projected was exactly that. The total ‘organic’ unity of a ‘regulated society’ that is often highlighted as one of the least attractive dimensions of Gramsci's hegemony,¹⁰⁵ is in effect upset by the

¹⁰³ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp.69-71.

¹⁰⁴ Anderson, ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’, pp.75-76.

¹⁰⁵ For example, Bellamy and Schechter, *Gramsci and the Italian State*, pp.157-163.

assumptions of the residual autonomy of ideological elements and the threat of hegemonic competition that underlies Gramsci's recourse to the notion of a leading element that must *persistently* struggle to organize and maintain consent through ideological compromises, fusion, proportioning and checking. The latter would of course be completely superfluous if the former was in fact achieved. One might well of course argue with some justification that the authentic Gramsci of the *Prison Notebooks* is more Hegelian and 'naively authoritarian' than this article's focus suggests,¹⁰⁶ but this should not prevent us from developing what seems the most pertinent dimension of Gramsci's hegemony for our own contemporary purposes. In a world in which the plural, fragmented and malleable character of identity has become a commonplace, it once again seems to me that incorporating and developing Gramsci's use of equilibrium within a more open, contingent and democratic theory of hegemony,¹⁰⁷ could bear significant results in our continuing efforts to understand and explain political and ideological ascendancy.

¹⁰⁶ See Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, pp.185-189; Martin, *Gramsci's Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction*, pp.103-106.

¹⁰⁷ Notwithstanding earlier reservations, Laclau and Mouffe are of course to be credited for providing just such a vision of hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.